

# Taking the Herd Mentality Out of Tourism

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Downtown Truckee is one of many scenic and historic towns in the Sierra Nevada that will be featured in the new Yosemite Gateway Geotourism MapGuide. *Photo by Jan Frewer/National Geographic*



A fisherman enjoys views of the Eastern Sierra from Bishop Creek Canyon. A new map created by National Geographic, the Sierra Business Council, and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy moves far beyond famous Yosemite's borders to highlight the region's unsung treasures. *Photo by Charles Phillips/National Geographic*

**The Tahoe Emigrant Corridor Nominations**

This summer the project will solicit nominations for the Tahoe Emigrant Corridor, which includes the counties of Placer, Nevada, El Dorado, Washoe, Douglas, and Carson. The final two sections of the map will guide visitors through the northern and southern Sierra regions.

Streegan said that those nominating a place or business should first ask one question: “Is this place distinct and authentic to the Sierra Nevada?” If the answer is yes, the nomination will likely be approved to make the map by the local panel reviewing the nominations.

While organizers are seeking nominations for the area between June and August, the map will constantly be updated. Site visitors can add comments, read what others have posted, even hit a key to connect to Facebook or Twitter accounts to instantly advise friends of what they’ve found.

Info and nominations: [sierranevadageotourism.org](http://sierranevadageotourism.org).

Travel is often governed by herd instincts. Like livestock, we all stampede to the same travel websites; overcrowd the same over-hyped destination; eat at the same inauthentic tourist traps. What we are left with is often fiction — a parallel world created at major tourist destinations specifically for the fanny-packed masses grasping their pre-packaged Expedia itineraries. The herd comes and goes without ever knowing a place.

National Geographic has been hard at work changing this travel paradigm across the world, and now they are teaming up with the Sierra Business Council and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to point Sierra Nevada visitors away from the beaten travel path and toward a more meaningful, authentic experience in the Range of Light.

The goal is twofold: to offer travelers a richer and more authentic experience and to build a tourism industry that helps to enrich and sustain a region’s culture, heritage, and environment, rather than tearing it all apart.

Right now, the trio is building a website and online map to highlight the locations and businesses that fit the definition of what is now being called “geotourism.” The “Tahoe Emigrant Corridor” — which includes Truckee and North Tahoe — is currently up for nomination. Anyone can nominate recreation areas, businesses, trails, or other destinations that are distinct and authentic to Truckee and Tahoe.

The result will be an online guidebook written by locals that will steer people to a favorite local coffee shop, a unique restaurant, or overlooked state park.

“I think the ultimate goal is to brand the Sierra Nevada as a holistic tourism destination ... more than what you could find in a Google search,” said Jim Dion of National Geographic.

The Sierra Business Council’s Lisa Biddle said she expects hundreds of nominations to flood in from locals eager to share some of the under-visited treasures of the area.

And the council’s Nikki Streegan said that although the tool is meant to guide out-of-towners, locals might be surprised what they will find on the map.

“We are hoping that local residents use it too. You might not know what is in your backyard — or in Plumas County,” said Streegan.

Streegan said the map will only include recreation areas that are equipped to handle new visitors, so locals can rest assured that things like those closely guarded secret mountain bike trails that have little or no parking will not be on the map.

So far, the online map includes the Yosemite area, and perusing it can give travelers a sense of the hidden treasures the future region-wide map will highlight.

Caroline McGrath's Yosemite Bug Rustic Resort is one of the businesses featured on the geotourism site. McGrath said she is thrilled her rustic resort outside of Mariposa is reaching a wider audience of travelers.

"It's another way of putting us on the map," said McGrath. "National Geographic is a huge organization."

Set on 50 acres, the lodging property offers both dorm-style and private rooms, and grows much of the produce offered at its café.

### **What is Geotourism?**

Geotourism is an oblique term that is often defined using even more oblique phrases like "sense of place," "place-based authenticity," or "integrity of place."

But behind all of the jargon is a fairly simple idea: Geotourism is tourism that enhances and sustains a region's history, culture, and environment. Think of it this way, in our increasingly homogenized globe, tourists can visit nearly any destination without experiencing anything endemic to that place. A visitor to Truckee could bed down in a hotel room that looks like a million other hotel rooms around the globe, begin the morning with a cup of coffee from a global coffee chain, visit an overcrowded Tahoe beach, eat a burger just like any other burger... you get the idea.

A geotourist might stay at Donner Summit's Clair Tappaan Lodge and learn that famed Sierra photographer Ansel Adams may have once also slept within the big-timbered, history-soaked walls; they might seek out a cup of Alpen Sierra or Sierra Pacific brew to begin the morning; and they might grab a burger made with locally grown beef at Truckee's Burger Me after visiting a secluded recreation area.

The geotourist not only leaves with a unique experience of a true regional culture but also supports those businesses that make the area they are visiting unique and attractive.

So far, the geotourism website has registered over 5,000 visits between March 15 and April 15. As the map is completed and the word spreads, that web traffic is expected to swell, eventually reaching a significant percentage of the 55 million people a 2002 National Geographic Survey defined as geotourists.

"We're getting international visits," said Streegan, "We've had hits from every continent except Antarctica."